

TRANSITIONS



BY ROBIN HEXTRUM

TRANSITIONS

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ABSTRACT

. The formal elements of my work respond to conflicting visual dualities in water. Water is a substance that can be both transparent and opaque. It allows its mysteries to stay hidden, or to loom eerily beneath its glassy surface. Realism defines these compositions, but abstract swirls and quick gestural marks contribute to each painting. This process of working allows me to maintain a balance between structure and freedom.

There are no strict narratives in this work. Instead, universal themes allow room for a viewer to bring personal experiences to a painting. Each painting is an attempt to capture a quality of water that is authentic and tangible. I use water as subject matter because of its ability to be both nourishing and eroding, a reflection of nature's creative and destructive duality. This constant state of ambivalence in water comes through in my art. Whether it is a specific mood, moment, or interaction, there is no right or wrong way to understand these paintings, just as there is no single way to describe the qualities of water.

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EPIGRAPH

“The life of Zen begins with the opening of satori.

*Satori may be defined as intuitive looking into,
in contradistinction to intellectual and logical understanding.*

*Whatever the definition, satori means the unfolding
of a new world hitherto unperceived.”*

-D.T. Suzuki

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DESCRIPTION

When I was a child, I often stumbled around tide pools, and stared in wonder at the otherworldly creatures looming just below the water's surface. I found water to be a fascinating substance that housed mysteries only my imagination could comprehend. As an entity, water is magical in its shape shifting quality. Water has no specific color or form. It simply mirrors its surroundings. It bounces off light; it soaks in light. It absorbs volumes, and can take any shape. Its defining quality is its potential to take on a variety of forms, sizes, shapes, and colors, resulting in beautiful abstractions. That said, I also have a fearful fascination of water. While surfing, I catch my breath whenever I see a shadowy presence below the water's surface. Water taps into deep, primordial emotions that recall preternatural fears of what might be lurking under the surface. There is a beautiful mystery in deep, black water. There is so much potential in all of that depth.

It took some time and a great deal of personal exploration to realize water contained infinite potential as a subject matter for an MFA thesis. I entered LCAD's graduate program with the intention of continuing my undergraduate body of work. During my final two years as an undergrad at USC, my works investigated the gender issues female athletes confront in sports. This work satisfied my needs on a deeply personal level as I encountered a great deal of sexism first hand during my time competing at a Division 1 level on the women's rowing team. However, several months into graduate studies, and after a full year of time spent away from collegiate sports, I felt like my connection to the topic was waning. As my identity began to shift from athlete to artist, so did my need for new subject matter in my paintings. In some respects, the answer to my search for a more satisfying thesis topic was right in front of my eyes the

entire time. Painting the water and reflections in compositions of rowers had always been particularly stimulating.

Though I knew I wanted to generally orient my graduate thesis around water, I confronted an immediate difficulty in finding a unique approach. It was quite daunting to undertake the task of painting water, when so many artists have tackled it with such skill and ingenuity. Additionally, as a subject it is ripe for overt sentimentality. My mentor at the time, Joe Gerges, encouraged me to research as many artists as I could who had painted water. While reading artists' statements, I discovered that most artists focused on water's ability to be simultaneously life giving and destructive. I easily identified with this conclusion and found that I also gravitated towards communicating water's ambivalent nature.

Primordial Fear

The first paintings I created for this series were two large seascapes that confronted nature's nourishing and threatening duality. They deal with my fear of deep water. Both pieces portray looming fish like forms under the water's surface. *Into the Unknown* is green and shows the forms as silhouettes, while *Ghost* contains blue hues and the animal appears as an unknown form approaching the surface. Each painting is a commanding size at 50 x 50 inches. The large scale of the paintings gives them the ability to dominate the visual field of the viewer and thus to further envelop him or her in the experience of the piece. These paintings aim at capturing the feeling



Figure 1, *Into the Unknown*

one has when something ominous lurks nearby. Each work rides a fine line between beautiful and unsettling. I find it interesting to observe reactions to the work. Some viewers see them and feel drawn into a relaxing and soothing environment. Others, especially those who have had traumatic experiences with the ocean, find the works very disturbing.

Before beginning this series, I had not made an artwork that was so open to interpretation. My previous works represented a personal struggle I felt as a female athlete. Each painting had a very specific meaning, and, on some level, the viewer could be right or wrong about that meaning depending upon the interpretation. Part of this cemented meaning was the political agenda behind the works. These new paintings do not contain a clear agenda or an opinion. Instead, they offer a mood and an experience for the viewer that is simultaneously calming and unsettling. This was a turning point in my artistic process since it was the first step I took towards creating work that could be very open. I relished in the ability to elicit a variety of responses. The paintings started to meet the viewer half way instead of forcefully pushing an idea.

Just as my concepts were shifting, so was my methodology. Instead of beginning with the conceptual idea for a piece, and then searching for an image to match that idea, I began making paintings that privileged the visual. This method of working allowed me to let go of controlling the idea behind the work, and also allowed viewers to bring their own experiences to a given piece. I began relying upon a more intuitive sense for selecting imagery and started the works without having solidified explanations. This proved to be a working process that not only allowed for more freedom and experimentation, but it also laid a foundation for stronger paintings. Before beginning

my studies in graduate school, I had not considered how crucial the visual principles of an artwork were to effectively communicating something to the viewer. By starting from a point of privileging the visual I was laying a foundation for more successful compositions and engaging imagery.

The next painting I created using this method is titled *Hydra*, and it also investigates fears of water and nature. Through my own experiences swimming, surfing and sailing along the rocky coast of the Pacific Ocean, I have gained a deep respect for water's deleterious nature. Kelp swarming along the ocean's surface is an engaging visual phenomenon, and I wanted to make a painting that could communicate that experience. It is important to note that the decision making process for this work did not begin with the concept for the work, but instead it began with the visual elements I intuitively found engaging and I later realized those elements communicate water's ambivalent nature.

In *Hydra*, kelp spirals up from the depths of the ocean and dissipates into the horizon. The perspective of the piece is from the ocean looking towards the land, which further emphasizes the viewer's feeling of instability. The spiraling tendrils



Figure 2, *Hydra*

of kelp mimic serpentine arms and stoke the fires of one's imagination. These artworks touch upon the vulnerability humans have in nature. We are ultimately slow, clumsy, defenseless creatures sitting at the top of the food chain. There is an alternating fear I have confronted between being terrified of the water's mighty forces and feeling intense anxiety over what might be inhabiting that water waiting to

snatch up prey. I have found that these strong instincts to avoid death at the hands of nature return in full force when one is immersed in the ocean.

My paintings based on a fear of water stem from my background growing up in a small beach town in Northern California called Stinson Beach. The population sign of the town still says 486 and it is known for its hiking trails, three-mile long stretch of beach, and unusually high great white shark population. It is difficult enough to brave the ocean after viewing the hit 1970's film *Jaws*, but to do so in an area that had two nearly fatal great white attacks while I was in high school took an extra degree of courage or at least a high capacity for denial on my part. Every surfer had his or her strategy to deal with the fear. One local man claimed he gave up eating fish and concluded that if he did not consume them, then fish would not eat him. Other surfers employed a buddy system and especially liked surfing with boogie boarders since they were more likely to get attacked than a surfer on a large board. In a small town where the waters swarmed with sharks and the hills were covered with mountain lions, rattlesnakes and ticks, it was impossible to avoid a sense of human vulnerability. One quickly develops a respect and admiration for nature. These initial paintings of eerie forms in the ocean helped me communicate an internal state of fear and fascination through a visual mode. They pay tribute to my reverence for the ultimate dominance nature forces over humans.

Submerged and Floating Objects

After painting submerged living forms, I began painting inanimate objects under water. The first painting in this series titled *Left Behind*, is of a discarded, algae-covered bicycle in water with trees reflecting on the surface. Some viewers hardly notice the bike beneath the complicated nuances of leaf shapes scattered across the canvas. This painting

is designed to elicit numerous questions such as: Who was the previous owner of this bike? What happened that made them discard it? Why is the bike submerged in water? All of these unanswered questions are rich with possibility and can be a fertile ground for viewers to bring their own story to the painting. The viewer brings a necessary level of



Figure 3. *Left Behind*

engagement to the work to complete its meaning. By painting a complicated and somewhat confusing image, I have demanded more from the viewer's visual effort. He or she must sort through the work to gain an understanding. This level of viewer engagement is very important to my art. Since creating this

painting, I have continued to employ this strategy in other works. Furthermore, the experience of viewing the painting mirrors the process of peeking into the unconscious. In this case the bike, which contains its own history, is only partially revealed. Like the unconscious, we can capture glimpses of the bike, but we cannot gain access to it in its entirety.

Later, I painted a similar piece that provided insight into the previously described work. While on a camping trip, I took photos of shallow ponds filled with decaying tree remains. I knew there was some significance to the fact that the remnants of the trees in form of reflections, pine needles, decomposing leaves, and branches were the main focus of this vantage point. The trees themselves are not part of the composition. I kept considering the idea of ghosts, or shadows or after effects. When discussing the work

with my mentor, he suggested that it was similar to Plato's allegory of the cave since the trees themselves were not in the picture plane. I titled the painting *Plato looking at Trees* and found this synopsis of the piece to be very satisfying and rich with metaphor. The painting *Left Behind* could also be interpreted as an allegory for the limits of human awareness and can be related to Plato's allegory of the cave. In the allegory, prisoners are chained up in a cave, staring at a wall. They see the shadows of puppeteers, but cannot turn their heads to see the source of the shadows. Their only understanding of reality is in a limited vocabulary. I titled the painting *Plato Looking at Trees* and found this synopsis of the piece to be very satisfying and rich with metaphor. In *Plato Looking*



Figure 4, *Plato Looking at Trees*

at Trees, the viewer sees the shadows of the trees on the water and observes decomposing needles but the real trees causing these phenomena are not in the picture. There are three remnants in this work. The first is the physical remains of the tree in the form of pine needles and branches, the second is the shadow of the tree, and the third is

the painting itself. A painting is only a record of its subject and cannot give us the entire

experience of the original source. The work acknowledges the limits of a painter's ability to describe reality first hand. The painting *Left Behind* could also be interpreted as an allegory for the limits of human awareness and can be related to Plato's allegory of the cave.

Following the premise of painting a personal item in water, I decided to paint a rocking horse. Again, this painting began with a stimulating visual, and the meaning slowly emerged. As I painted it, I warmed to the possibility of multiple interpretations. A rocking horse floating in water could read not only as the aftermath of a natural disaster, but it could also be viewed as a visual metaphor for a traumatic childhood. The painting is large in scale, and I exaggerated the current of water around the horse. Though it was not my original intention for the painting, this piece has deeply personal relevance and was very cathartic to paint. At the time I was painting it, I was struggling with my

parent's divorce. Their separation cast a dark light over my own childhood and raised a lot of questions about my father's commitment to our family. This painting helped me communicate my own



Figure 5. *Swept Away*

feelings of nostalgia and sadness while leaving it open for viewers to bring their stories to the table. Like the floating horse, my foundation felt unstable. I confronted the reality that my parents had never loved each other and that my already difficult to reach father was pulling farther away from our family by remarrying into another one. I felt like I was floating and was at the whim of outside currents. Furthermore, I identified with the state of transition exhibited in this painting. The horse does not take refuge in the home of a child, nor is it crushed under trash in a

dump. It is floating, waiting, and wishing for a resolution to a state of limbo whatever it may be.

I created a painting in a similar visual realm for a show themed around the year 1942 at the OC Great Park. For the exhibition, artists executed pieces that offered up a memory, experience or political commentary about events that occurred in 1942. My painting *Internment* was done in honor of Japanese Americans. The painting is composed on a square format and shows several paper cranes floating in a stream.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, approximately 110,000 Japanese Americans were



Figure 6, *Internment*

relocated from their homes to internment camps. This painting represents the souls of internment who lost their free will and agency. I painted paper cranes because they reference traditional Japanese paper arts, and therefore serve as an appropriate metaphor for the damage to Japanese American culture. Typically, birds embody freedom, but in this case the cranes float in

murky waters and must follow the will of outside forces.

This painting began with a much more specific idea and agenda, but that does not mean that I view it as containing only one interpretation. Though I painted it with the intention of communicating the displacement of a large group of Americans, I understand and support the fact that it contains other possible meanings to viewers.

Formal Elements of Water

I then created several works that focused on more formal aspects of water. These paintings are brighter and more optimistic than the previous works. At the time I painted them, I found myself in a healthier and more stable mental state as I gained acceptance of my family history and potential challenges I would have to overcome in the future. I naturally gravitated towards more peaceful imagery because it mimicked my internal state.

After viewing landscape paintings by Rackstraw Downes in Kenny Harris's Pictorial Space class, I could not avoid the temptation of extreme formatting. My piece *Lake Anza* depicts a rippling reflection of trees on a severely horizontal canvas. This painting contains realism in the subject matter and abstraction in its execution. There is a tactility to the surface quality of the paint. One mass of paint juts up against another to develop the illusion of reflections dancing across the water's surface. In terms of format, this piece breaks away from the traditional landscape rectangle. Typically, the viewer's eye can explore landscapes and follow meandering S-shaped or O-shaped paths. In *Lake Anza* however, the long and narrow work directs the viewer's eye in such a way that they must look from left to right and right to left. This painting forces a level of viewer engagement with the work by setting up a direction of eye movement.



Figure 7, *Lake Anza*

I painted a similar work of trees reflecting in a creek near my apartment. It is also on a wide format and flips viewer's orientation of the subject. Horizontal water ripples run across the canvas from left to right and vertical reflections of trees interrupt these ripples in a rhythmic fashion. As I was painting the work, I knew something in that visual was familiar, but I could not place it. The word rhythm kept surfacing into my mind, but I did not know what to do with it. Months after the work was done, I realized it looked like a musical score. I titled the piece *Treble Clef* since it ultimately explores the rhythmic qualities of water reflections that mirror sheet music.

My painting titled *Calligraphy* illustrated the shift between transparency and opacity in water. The lower half of the painting shows transparent water, the middle shows a combination between transparent and opaque water, and the top portion depicts

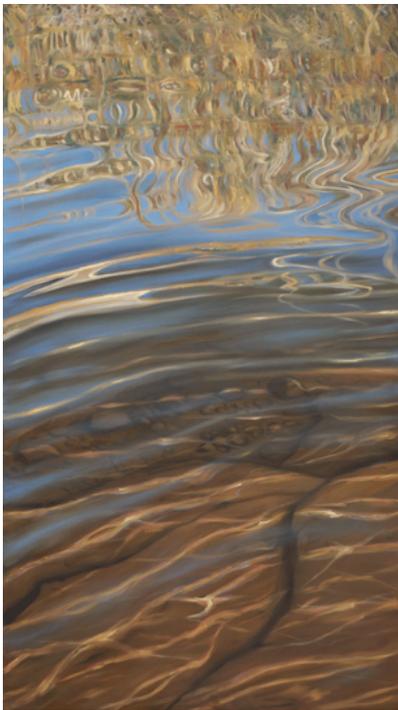


Figure 8, *Calligraphy*

reeds reflecting on the surface of the water. This piece showcases the visually intriguing abstractions that can originate from light reflecting on the water's surface. The viewer's eye movement oscillates back and forth from the surface reflections to the muddy riverbed below. This painting can also read as a visual symbol for the boundary between the subconscious and the conscious. If the water below the surface represents the subconscious and the reflections represent consciousness, then the transition between the two can symbolize their interaction. *Calligraphy* serves as a visual example of the way our subconscious and

conscious behaviors are inevitably intertwined. It set the tone for a series of later works that delved into this in more depth.

Water as a Metaphor for Transition and the Subconscious

I went on to paint several more paintings exploring a visual metaphor for the unconscious. I chose to paint on extreme vertical formats to further emphasize the state of transition. One painting, titled *Three States of Matter*, focuses on the transition from sand to ocean to clouds, or, from solid to liquid to gas. This vertical format guides the viewer's eye back and forth between these states. I eliminated the horizon line to enhance the flow between the liquid state of water and the gaseous state of the clouds. Without this strong horizontal cut across the canvas, the viewer can more easily transition

between areas of the painting. This piece also contains a path of light that further supports the viewer's eyes movement along a vertical axis. One might interpret this work as a metaphor for shifting states of consciousness in the form of different states of material substances.

Another work in a similar vein, *Red Tide* is a painting of red water. The ocean's blue surface at the top of the painting transitions into glowing red waves, and then fades into a deep plum hue for a majority of the lower section. This loss of information is very important to the work. The deep, dark, black offers just as much to the viewer as the rendered information of the waves. The balance of the known and the unknown create a stimulating interaction. When viewing the format of this work and the use of negative space, one might draw connections to Japanese scroll paintings. One visual element I have noticed in scroll paintings is



Figure 9,
Red Tide

their extreme vertical and horizontal formats along with concentrated areas of focus and line-work offset by open space. This painting reverses the form of transcendence one typically might make in a picture. Instead of culminating upwards to the sky, this piece transcends down into a deep, velvety black color field. This painting is also a strong symbol for the subconscious. The deep, black area of the painting is indescribable and intangible which mirrors properties of the unconscious. The surface of the painting in blue ripples is tangible and comprehensible, which parallels it with our conscious world. In this piece the unconscious state dominates the conscious, which correlates with my newfound working process of relying more heavily upon unconscious leanings and notions.

Two paintings that further explore the concept of using water as a symbol for the mind and transitions are my paintings *Nexus* and *Rhizome*. These works both portray interference patterns of light refracted through water's surface. The light patterns mimic dendritic webs within the brain. The fact that the patterns are made out of electricity further enhances this brain to water metaphor since action potentials from one neuron to the next connect through a chemically induced electrically charge. During my undergraduate studies I completed a double major in Fine art and Neuroscience. I have been longing to bridge the gap between the two disciplines and here I have found a potential platform to do so.



Figure 10, Nexus

The aforementioned paintings explore liminal spaces between two realms. Through discussions with my mentor, Peter Zokosky, I began seeing the metaphorical potential this contained. He pointed out that I was going through my own transition

during my MFA, and this was coming out in the work. My paintings represent my own artistic process and symbolize my dialogue with the inner levels of my mind. Since entering the graduate program, I have transitioned into a method of working that employs a greater use of unconscious inspiration. I am beginning to trust the power of my own artistic intuition and these paintings communicate my fascination with the exchange between what I am consciously aware of as an artist and what speaks to me on an unconscious level. The selective isolation of extreme vertical and horizontal formats further supports symbolism for individual perception and individual consciousness.

I recently had the privilege of posing for Alex Kanevsky, and he confirmed my belief in following artistic intuition. I sat for him in a chair, on top of a model stand. After each break, he had me rotate my chair about sixty degrees. The drawing ultimately looked like a version of me spinning around a top. It was fantastic to see the work slowly unfold and hear him explain his process. He told me there was something in these pieces that he needed to explore. He had not pinned down a concrete definition since a variety of influences and ideas were still swirling. These ideas included capturing movement in the form of a stationary art piece by portraying multiple perspectives simultaneously. The shape of the drawings also referenced Velazquez's *Infantas* with huge billowing skirts that Kanevsky had burned into his mind while visiting Spain. He also suggested that it could be related to a Hindu Deity with multiple splayed out arms. He explained that he consistently makes decisions based on intuition. Sometimes, one needs to make a painting without a clear idea of the definition, and allow the very definition of the piece to be its ambiguity and potential for multiple and disparate interpretations.

RESEARCH

This body of work references a variety of subjects including Greek Mythology, psychology, neuroscience, and Japanese scroll painting. Though the paintings stem from an intuitive source, it is necessary to contextualize the paintings in order to develop a deeper understanding and a richer awareness of the true significance each painting contains.

A large portion of the ideation for these works has been in the form of studying artists who deal with similar subject matter. I observe the methods they employ to conquer the challenges of painting water and consider ways to incorporate their conceptual or technical skills into a working process. This form of research helps construct visual literacy and capacity to intuitively conceive of intriguing works.

Symbolism

According to Eric Ackroyd, author of the *Dictionary of Dream Symbols*, water can be interpreted in a variety of ways. He writes that water “is a feminine symbol, representing either your own femininity (whether you are male or female), or your mother. It is therefore important to note your reaction to the water in your dream”(53). Water has often been correlated with feminine energy. One might interpret my paintings as strong embodiments of feminine energy through the portrayal of large-scale oil paintings of water. I have always had a deep respect and admiration for the women in my life. This might be subconsciously contributing to the way I paint water in a way that is both life supporting and capable of extreme force. Ackroyd writes “water is also a symbol of the unconscious, especially if it is deep”(53). This reference to water as relating to the unconscious brings me back to my previously mentioned point that I am open to multiple interpretations for these works. Water has a variety of cultural and

symbolic meanings and associations. Each work will inevitably contain a variety of interpretations spanning the range from feminine energy to the unconscious mind. The connection between water and the subconscious is further illustrated in the following writing from *The Book of Symbols*:

Living fossils in the sea, like the archaic energies in the psyche, have remained largely unchanged over millions of years, lurking in the icy darkness of the bottom waters. Whole ecosystems, untouched by sunlight, flourish in the sea just as networks of accumulated experience flourish in the psyche, enhancing the waters regardless of our knowledge of their existence. In each of us, salty, amniotic waters run in our mnemonic veins (60).

In the previous quotation one can observe the significant metaphoric parallels between the human mind and the ocean. It is also fascinating that we contain salt in our blood harkening back to our origins.

In the book *Signs and Symbols: An Illustrated Guide to their Meaning and Origin*, the author details a variety of interpretations of water. She writes, “Often seen as mysterious, the sea also represents the unconscious mind, while deep waters have a symbolism related to the dead and the supernatural” (Gibson, 32). Again, there is a connection drawn between water and the unconscious mind. The relation to death and the supernatural further supports my reasoning for viewing these works as metaphors for transcendence.

Flood imagery also contains a great deal of mythological meaning. “Global flood stories are common to almost every civilization around the world from China and Russia to Sumatra and Peru. In general terms, they represent the chaos that results when humans

are out of harmony with nature and the gods” (Taschen, 50). My paintings of objects floating in water or submerged under its surface recall flood imagery and can be connected to a sense of disruption or disharmony with nature and humans. Though I would not describe this series of works as strictly environmental, one could interpret a component of their meaning to be a depiction of the struggling relationship between humans and their natural environment.

This series of work uses additional metaphors beyond the liquid state of water to communicate moods and feelings. My painting *Three States of Matter* utilizes cloud formations to communicate a liminal boundary between one state and the next. Taschen also describes the symbolic significance of clouds by writing “Clouds are a part of an endless, reciprocal exchange between the ethereal and the earthly, moving between formless and form” (58). Clouds, an evaporated form of water, exist in their own transitional space and span the division between heavenly skies and land-bound earth. This supports my use of them as a subject matter for a painting about the liminal. Another area of boundary is the beach. It “represents the convergence of three vast worlds: sky, sea and land.” When we stand on the shores of the beach we can take in all of these worlds and lose ourselves in their infinite expanse. Like the ocean, the beach can also serve as a metaphor for the “daily experience of the slim shore between conscious and unconscious lapped and buffeted, shifted and changed, temporarily submerged and once again delineated in the tidal rhythms of waking and sleeping” (122).

Psychological References

To understand why water is an applicable metaphor for the unconscious, it necessary to gain a better understanding of the current scientific construction of the

conscious and unconscious. Freudian theories of the unconscious rely heavily on sexually repressed feelings. Contemporary neuroscientists and psychologists refer back to Freud's work not for its interpretation of the unconscious and a hot bed of sexual urges, but rather for Freud's emphasis on the significance of the unconscious (Comer et al. 172). Memory can be broken down into two categories, implicit memory and explicit memory. An explicit memory is one we can consciously recall and retell. Implicit memories are what one commonly associates with the unconscious mind. Implicit memories "refer to the knowledge that we are not typically aware of- information we cannot recall at will--but that we use in the performance of various tasks in life" (Comer et al. 172).

If implicit or unconscious memory comprise all memories, skills and behaviors we cannot consciously control, then one begins to create a visual diagram where the unconscious is a vast pool of collected experiences that contribute to the surface manifestations of consciousness. This visual image can be best correlated with a deep body of water. The water beneath the surface is the unconscious and the water on the surface is the conscious mind. Swells from the deep waters of the unconscious rise up to become waves and reactions on the surface. This explanation of the current scientific understanding of consciousness underlies the visual elements of my work that contain a thematic similarity to the subconscious and therefore affect the viewer's experience of the work.

The Power of Intuition

Antonio Damasio, an expert in the field of creativity and the brain, notes the power of subconscious, intuitive processes in his book *Self Comes to Mind*. He cites a study by Dutch psychologist Ap Dijksterhuis where subjects were asked to make a simple

decision and a more complex decision under two different sets of circumstances. They were asked to decide between two toasters and two homes to purchase. In the first situation researchers gave them three minutes to deliberate and consciously decide which item to purchase. In the second scenario, researcher's distracted their subjects so they had little to no time to utilize conscious decision making processes. The results showed a clear bias towards unconscious decision-making. In both cases subjects made better decisions when they were distracted. Damasio explains this phenomenon by writing "our cognitive unconscious is capable of reasoning and has a larger "space" for operations than the conscious counterpart" (291).

Using an intuitive approach for selecting my imagery and making compositional decisions is a major premise for my current artistic process. Many of my successful paintings initially stem from visuals I find appealing, which I can later analyze and explain. When I over-think my work or build a forceful narrative that is not interwoven with a visual from the beginning, the painting is stiff and awkward. A conceptually driven piece might be easier to discuss throughout the artistic process, but it is often less visually engaging. I altered my working process to privilege the visual. In doing so, I am utilizing a part of my mind that is better at selecting engaging imagery and has had more practice. As Damasio mentioned in the example of home-buyers, the unconscious "has a larger space for operations" than a more conscious part of the brain. The unconscious finds certain images engaging by adding up a lifetime of visual experience, while the conscious mind might lean towards less intriguing imagery if it is easier to defend in written word or verbal dialogue. I will elaborate on this process later in the conceptual methodology section.

Neuroaesthetics

Last spring I attended a neuroaesthetics conference at USC where great thinkers like Antonio Demasio and David Freedberg discussed the rich potential within the study of how the brain interprets visual stimuli. Though the field is in its infancy and artists are intuitively leaps and bounds ahead of where science can establish solid biological foundations, there are a few elements within this subject matter that influence my artwork. One concept that Dr. Ramachandran stresses in neuroaesthetics is the use of isolation. He mainly explores its use in line drawing where a particular line and its simplicity allows for a focus on certain elements. Or, put more simply, he concludes less is more. My artworks in extreme vertical and horizontal formats employ this concept by selectively isolating what the viewer can focus on and providing them with the essential information needed to understand the concept of water's transition from its depth to its surface. Without the background noise and distracting additional elements like boats and docks, these paintings exaggerate the concept of transition. Just as a cartoonist would emphasize unique facial features, my works highlight the quality of water. The traditional seascape or landscape format incorporates distracting elements that do not support my message and my intention as an artist, so I alter it along the lines of this neuroaesthetic principle. I am asking the viewer to consider something in a novel way and to derive more meaning from it than they might otherwise gain from a painting done in a more conservative format.

Japanese and Chinese Scroll Paintings

My work currently explores extreme vertical and horizontal compositions that reference Japanese and Chinese scroll paintings. Unlike western conventions of the

rectangle, Japanese and Chinese artists tackle long vertical and horizontal compositions and incorporate multiple panels in their works. These scrolls allow for an extended work that does not face the same types of restrictions of a conventional rectangular canvas. In Joseph D. Parker's book *Zen Buddhist Landscape Arts of Early Muromachi Japan*, he explains how Japanese scroll paintings also derive visual imagery from poetry more often than historical narrative works as seen in the history of traditional Western oil painting (37). He writes "...it is important to note that the identification in the Northern Sung of painting with poetry contributed to the popularity of poetic subjects as opposed to themes taken from history or the classics" (37). Buddhist monks creating art at the time found a strong connection between poetry and painting. They even considered "painting as "poems without voices"(*wu-sheng shih*) and poems as "paintings without voices" (*yu, sheng hua*)" (36). This way of conceiving of paintings reinforces the concept that they serve as transcendent art forms that humans can engage with on an intellectual and spiritual level. My paintings seek to create a similar poetic mood or feeling. Parker further supports this notion by writing "In much East Asian elite culture the landscape was traditionally an image of spiritual freedom, religious power, moral purity, and a political position transcendent to or outside of the ambitions and avarice of ordinary life" (Parker 18).

Another interesting parallel between my work and Asian artistic theory is the idea of communicating an inner psychological state in an external artistic object. Many of my paintings communicate feelings, moods and emotions through external landscape subject matter. Parker explores this notion of the artist's ability to communicate internal states by writing:

When expressed in art, the inner state of the individual and the inner perception of objective truths of his subject were not only “lodged” in the art object. Sung and later critics believed, but were also apparent to their audience in the act of interpretation. The assumption in these interpretive theories that an artist’s inner state is available to others in creative expression is a long-standing assumption of Chinese artistic theory (41).

This concept corresponds to my working process that allows viewers to engage moods, feelings and emotions in the work that rise from my own subconscious notions.

My works also follow a similar vertical format to scroll paintings. The origins of verticality in scroll paintings are unclear. “Historians are not yet certain as to the precise process by which

painting scrolls came to be done in the vertical format. This format gives the painted image more prominence than it has in the horizontal scroll format” (Parker 80). Painting on a

vertical format offers viewers a different experience from a horizontal format. Monk quarters had an impact in the development of verticality. Their architectural construction of living quarters contain an alcove that “provided a place for hanging vertical paintings, a format that by the end of the century was far and away the most important for the poem-and-painting scrolls, and lead to the gradual decline in the fourteenth century of the



Figure 11 *Blue Mountains and White Clouds*, Minshuku Gensei, 1420

use of horizontal scrolls” (Parker 80). What may have been a convenient decision based on architectural demands laid the framework for engaging and formidable compositions.

Mythological References

Many of my works contain references to Greek Mythology. Part of the origin of this is that I listened to *The Iliad* while completing my works. Applying a myth can infuse an ordinary scene from nature with an additional layer of meaning and complexity. The piece *Thetis* accomplishes this. At first glance, the piece is the interaction between the dark sea and foam against the shore. The title, however, references a female god, so the viewer can interpret the piece as a visual metaphor for feminine power. I intentionally used Thetis instead of Poseidon because her association could embody female strength. Poseidon’s overuse in popular culture also makes his name a convenient but dull painting title.

As I previously mentioned, my work *Icarus* directly alludes to its myth by showing the aftermath of Icarus’ fall. In the story of Icarus, King Minos places both Icarus and his father Daedalus into a labyrinthine prison. Daedalus fashioned two sets of wings with feathers, wood and wax. He warned his son not to fly too close to the heat of the sun because the wax connecting the feathers to the wood would melt. In the overwhelming excitement at being able to fly, Icarus flew too close to the sun and fell to the ocean where he met his death. Like *Thetis*, my painting *Icarus* may at first appear to be a simple scene from nature. Perhaps a viewer would see the feathers as the remains of a dead bird. Yet, the title connects the work to a mythological narrative.

Compositional Influences



Figure 12 *Under the Westside Highway at 145th Street: The North River Water Pollution Control Plant*, Rackstraw Downes 2008

Rackstraw Downes' use of extreme vertical and horizontal compositions had a significant effect on my artistic process. Downes is landscape painter who works exclusively from life. He is vegan, does not own a camera, and drives across the country in a van painting obscure parts of America. He paints large paintings that are unusually subtle and do not have a conventional focal point. I found his extreme horizontal compositions to be very inspiring and I enjoyed seeing an artist break away from the traditional rectangle. Viewing his work helped me recognize the potential for a range of formats for paintings.

Reading Ray Bether's book *Composition in Pictures* further supported my inclination to branch out into long and skinny or wide and narrow formats. In the book he writes that:

“There is nobility in a vertical line which can be experienced emotionally from its direction alone. Tall trees, tall buildings, or even tall people have a dignity in

themselves from their dominant direction. A child attains the dignity of the vertical when he learns to walk upright. A vertical line is positive; it follows the pull of gravity and helps to stabilize a composition by reaffirming two of the format lines” (48).

He goes on to also unpack the potential meaning within an extreme horizontal format. Bethers writes, “A horizontal composition is very similar to a vertical in a horizontal position, both are a reaffirmation of dominant format directions. The horizontal can be a line at rest, suggesting the passive, unbroken line of the horizon;” (52). After reading this break down of the difference between horizontal and vertical formats, I began to consider how my paintings have been employing these devices and how I could intentionally apply them in later works. At the present moment I am very drawn to vertical formats and their association with spirituality and transcendence, but I assume I will also continue to explore extreme horizontals.

Allusions to Natural Disaster



Figure 13 *Red Room #1*. James Casebre

Viewing James Casebere’s work planted seeds in my mind to paint scenes of flooding and natural disasters. He is a photographer who composes his still lifes by constructing intricate miniature homes out of plaster and then flooding them with water. By building his own models, he retains full artistic control over his

compositions. Though I have not yet built my own models, I recognized that I could

construct components of my paintings and stage my work with interesting object placement. Something I also noted from his work is how quiet it appears. There is a destructive undertone, but it is still a peaceful image. This syncretic visual setting provides an interesting platform for dialogue about the work.

Marina Moeves delves into similar themes by painting calm residential settings in the aftermath of disaster. I came upon her work in an exhibit with Wes Christiansen at Santa Monica College. Seeing her paintings incorporate elements of beauty, destruction, and water, led me to consider how I could use personal items and submerge them in water to elicit a feeling of recent trauma.

Paint Application

Alyssa Monks paints water in unique and unexpected ways. She paints self portraits abstracted by a layer of water or behind a film of a steamy shower door. I greatly admire Monks' use of abstraction within realism. She paints with an emphasis on representation, but also explores the abstract elements within her figures and the bubbles. Looking at her work helped me recognize the beauty in having a film over an object to abstract it. I also find it quite impressive how built up her surface is. There is a tactile quality to her work that infuses the paintings with more weight and significance. I have since been



Figure 14 *Disconnected*,
Alyssa Monks, 2012

keenly aware of the need to incorporate this tactility into my own work.

Alex Kanevsky's use of paint is incredibly inspiring. He builds up beautiful layers of paint by developing a single painting over the course of a few years. He rides a fine line between representation and abstraction and will intentionally obstruct perfectly rendered forms. In addition to creating fascinating paintings, he possesses a wise approach to art and life. He emphasizes that living an artist's lifestyle outside of the norm is a very enriching experience for the soul and that one should not apologize for that. He makes thoughtful, intriguing paintings, and works from a very intuitive area.

I have also looked to Kent Williams for surface inspiration. He builds up layers of paint and medium and even suspends globs of pigment in transparent layers of galkyd gel. One can stare at a Kent Williams painting for hours on end and still find new worlds to explore and exciting histories within the paint. My recent paintings have explored the potential of this method by incorporating more mediums into my layer process.

Color Choices

My first introduction to complex color choices within artwork was in Sergio Sanchez's figure painting course. Throughout the course we painted from live models using different colored gels on the lights. He explained the dependency color has on its light source. For a homework assignment in the class, I painted the same tree at different times of day and further enhanced my artistic sensitivity to different qualities of light. His influence carries on into my work and how I conceive of color relationships with I paint.

During my graduate studies I worked with master colorist John Asaro. One cannot help but succumb to his intoxicating use of color and paint application. When I



Figure 15 *Fire Bird Ballet*, John Asaro 2012

talked with him in person he told me he does not struggle anymore. He follows the flow and curves of the form and gets very excited about interesting brushwork. He helped me consider the ways I use paint and he showed me I could experiment with color. My

painting *Red Tide* stems from this need to break out of traditional color representations used to paint water. Working with Sergio Sanchez and John Asaro helped me develop the confidence to push use of color in a logical format.

I saw one of Matthew Cornell's water paintings at the Long Beach Museum of Art and found it extremely poignant. The painting was titled *Vermilion* and fluctuates between blues of reflected light and oranges in the shadow shapes. I tried to emulate his technique with my painting *Icarus*. I also appreciated the variety of scale Matthew Cornell works in. I have an inclination to paint large, so it is helpful to see extremely powerful smaller scale pieces because it reminds me of the intimacy a viewer develops with a work when they must take it in from inches away.

Utilizing the Imagination and Invention

I greatly admire Hilary Brace's drawings and her methodology. She invents otherworldly cloudscape with charcoal. She begins without a set plan and makes marks on her surface. She then follows her instincts to



Figure 16 *Untitled (#09)*, Hilary Brace 2009

develop these marks and explores their formal potential. After viewing her work, I felt like I needed to tap into that unconscious space for more visual imagery. I also began to realize that some of my favorite artists including Ran Ortner and Ray Turner all invent forms.

Eva Speer is another artist from the Pacific northwest who paints water scenes and adds elements of abstraction and bizarre sections of color and paint application that appear to be from an invented source. Viewing her work further inspired me to experiment with developing my own compositions out of water. I painted *Red Tide* entirely from my imagination and did not refer to any photos. This is the first large scale painting I have created without the use of photo reference and I gained the courage to attack it by seeing the success of other artists who use invention to their advantage.

Painting from Natural Light Sources

I saw one of Juan Sanchez Cotan's still life paintings at the San Diego Museum of Art and could not erase the image from my mind. He created mysterious still life paintings with fruit and vegetables hanging from strings against a dark, quiet background. Seeing his work reinstated a desire for painting from natural light. There is a beautiful subtlety to his painting and a great deal of this stems from his care in communicating soft transitions and temperature shifts. Indirect Natural light shining indoors has cool light shapes and warm shadow shapes that create a distinctive quality to still lifes. Since viewing his work I have set up more still lifes from natural light sources to attain this effect.

Losing Information

Eastman Johnson's painting "A Woman Reading," leaves a lasting impact on the viewer. The painting shows a woman reading a book by the seashore. The water and the sky connect in such a way that one would not even know he or she is looking at water if it were not for a white sail boat floating in the distance. He completely blurs the horizon line. I love the poetic quality of this piece. Seeing this work made me wonder what information can be taken away from a work to heighten the feeling of transcendence a viewer might experience.



Figure 17 *Woman Reading*, Eastman Johnson, 1874

METHODOLOGY

Idea Collecting

I gather a majority of my ideas when I am outside of the studio. I usually find myself searching for a visual that inspires me. While running, biking, hiking and surfing, I am constantly in a position to soak up my natural surroundings. My eye gravitates towards water when I am observing nature. I consider the water's quality, its clarity, its color, animals swimming or slithering near by, and even variations in the amount of algae and foam. Different types of weather offer a variety of colors, temperatures and reflective qualities. While surfing, I also take in the shapes and behaviors of the waves and notice whether the water is blue-green, green-blue, purple, or even a reddish orange. Not only am I seeking out visual sensations, but I am also paying

close attention the feeling I get from different situations. Some visuals offer a soothing experience while others, especially unknown shapes lurking below the water's surface, arouse feelings of unease and fear. I make a mental note to myself of the types of moods and qualities that could contribute to a successful artwork.

Conceptual Methodology

As I mentioned earlier my working process has drastically changed during the course of my graduate studies. I evolved into a method that relies upon an intuitive process for selecting imagery. I follow what catches my eye and allow myself to entertain the possibility of painting something before solidifying its conceptual significance. Typically the visual comes first, and content arrives from free association during the painting process or after the painting is complete. For every artist it is necessary to maintain a balance between the intuitive and the critical. When I posed for Alex Kanevsky and learned about his painting methodology, I felt validated in my approach. He also relies on an intuitive source for selecting visual imagery and will later discover deeper levels of meaning in his work. For some of my work, the meaning of the piece may not reach the surface until I have had time to sit and contemplate the work.

After considering the visuals I find striking on an intuitive level, I have noticed that they fall into similar categories. These include transitions, reflections, and organized abstractions. The transition from transparency to opacity in water is a visual I find particularly engaging. I also enjoy color and value shifts across the length of a canvas. As I mentioned earlier, I find transitions visually appealing because I am in my own state of transition as an artist and in life. Transitions on a canvas are an external confirmation of my internal state. Reflections offer a window into a different world and are a remnant

of their original source. They also contain stimulating elements of distortion and abstraction. My painting *Plato Looking at Trees* explored the notion of reflections as remnants and my painting *Calligraphy* explored the chaotic and gestural abstractions contained within a reflection. This brings me to another common visual element in my work, which is organized abstraction. I am currently painting a large agave plant in my studio that has a similar abstract quality to water. The arms of the cactus fold in and out of one another in a loose rhythm. I am drawn to abstract shapes that push the boundary of form, but I ultimately crave the stability of a three dimensional, realistic form.

I find that form and content are ultimately synonymous. I have had many water oriented experiences across my life span including growing up in a beach community, surfing, competing on a division 1 rowing team, and then studying at LCAD's MFA program approximately a mile from the ocean. These collected experiences have provided me with inclinations towards water-based images that contain metaphorical significance. The metaphors often reflect my own internal state whether it is confusion, transition or a conflict between order and chaos. I employ intuitively selected imagery from nature to communicate my internal condition to the outside world.

Photography

I work from a combination of photography, nature, and still life setups. For my larger scale works I still rely on photos. I am beginning to paint larger works from my imagination and I have started utilizing tools acquired from painting a variety of seascapes. Sometimes I go out and seek a composition and other times I draw from the image bank I have collected. Two or three years after I have taken a photo I will see something in it I did not see before, or I will have gained new technical knowledge about

how to tackle a challenging composition and therefore feel more able to take it on. When I go to take photos in a particular location, I take hundreds of shots and keep most of them for future reference. Since I recognize that some images may be useful later, I try to avoid deleting too many images from a shoot. My paintings are beginning to drift from relying on photography and I hope to continue on this trajectory. Ultimately I would like to use a photograph for inspiration and not create a painting that has a photographic feeling. Eliminating the feeling of a photographic filter in my work would give the pieces a more tangible human and psychological element because they are not clearly achieved through the mediation of a mechanical process. Little by little I am getting there, but it is something that will take some time to achieve.

Collecting Photos from other Sources

During the process of making water paintings I have collected images from artists also dealing with water, or who have a specific technical ability I would like to adopt to my own work. These paintings inspire me to push the boundaries of my subject matter, color, paint application, and composition. I also collect photos of water from periodicals whenever there is a flood or a hurricane. Tons of beautiful photography has been born out of the ashes of very traumatic natural disasters.

Drawing & Painting from Life

I make an effort to do supplemental drawings and paintings from life as much as possible to maintain a high level of naturalism in my work. I have done a great deal of plein air paintings of coastlines and seascapes to achieve a better understanding of the properties of water and to challenge my ability to capture the behavior of water in a quick and loose painting. I like working outdoors because it necessitates quick decisions and

allows me to take more risks. Working on small outdoor sketches also provides a wonderful opportunity to play with compositions I might otherwise not avoid on a larger format. To keep up my drawing ability I run a gesture workshop so I can get in five hours a week drawing from a live model. Maintaining this high level of draftsmanship infuses my work with a solid structural basis and helps me feel more confident as I paint.

Developing Compositions

I use Photoshop to assemble my compositions. This software enables cropping and collaging that can help in the process of visual problem solving. Once the dimensions of the canvas are set, I feel ready to pursue the image. Artists often struggle fitting an image onto a pre-made canvas of conventional dimensions. Since my recent works have been extreme compositions, I have to work on a canvas that breaks away from convention and supports the image I am creating. Square canvases and long rectangular shapes offer interesting visual challenges and result in engaging compositions. Sometimes a normal rectangle does not stimulate the same form of idea generating as an atypical format might. Once the composition is set, I will adjust the image in Photoshop to attain the correct hue, temperature, and contrast for my piece. Though it may sound contradictory, using Photoshop to assemble compositions allows me to distance myself from the original photo. I do not have to rely on the color, and composition of my original photographic source. This form of technology allows me to maintain more control over the process so I can add or eliminate elements from a photo instead of being tied to painting exactly what my camera captured.

Color and Value studies

Completing color studies for my paintings helps me work out issues on a smaller scale before taking the work to the next stage. In this phase I can experiment with the color and composition and make subtle adjustments to the work. It allows me to plan out color mixing and I will note which colors I used to achieve a certain hue so I can replicate it later. It also helps me look closely at what I am painting. I will notice shifts in color and temperature that will guide my completion of a larger scale work through this exercise.

Executing the Final Image

The process of completing a painting depends largely on the size of the canvas. For smaller still life images, I begin by laying out burnt umber and ultramarine washes and then I create a toned drawing of the image. I let that dry and go back in with masses of colors and values. After that, I apply a coat of medium and work up finished details.

For larger scale pieces I mass in a midtone gray color, a transparent brown wash, or a bright color. I will typically create a grid for these larger paintings since they tend to warp if one transfers them without guidance. I draw in with thin paint to establish my main shapes. Once I complete the basic drawing I can confidently block in large masses of color and value. Slowly, I refine these masses into comprehensible and dimensional forms. In the final layer I utilize mediums like linseed oil, galkyd lite and neomeglip to apply glaze work that will unify the surface. I make decisions to eliminate unnecessary elements or to add elements to make a section of a painting successful.

When applying the paint, I consider methods of application that will enhance the meaning of the work. If I want to communicate boldness and strength, then I will use

thick, swift brush strokes. This can be seen in my painting *Calligraphy* in the upper section. I wanted to emphasize the business and chaos of the reflections with my paint so I used my palette knife and thick bristle brushes. For more quiet, subtle works, the paint application is soft and delicate. One might observe this method of application in *Hydra* where smoothly painted transitions contribute to a soft and subtle feeling of the work that is necessary to support its ominous mood.

It is also important to mention that I work on multiple paintings simultaneously. If I get to a point of exhaustion or frustration with a painting, I put it to the side and paint on something else. My studio environment contains an average of three to four paintings in progress at any given moment. As I rest from one painting I work on another. This allows me to explore a variety of ideas and pull out separate bodies of work from my studio. Though this paper has thoroughly explained my series of works dealing with water, I do not tie myself to one type of subject matter. In fact, I am currently painting an origami flower, a cactus and an iceberg in my studio. This variety keeps me engaged in the painting process. As I mentioned earlier, I have gained a great deal of knowledge and experience from my graduate studies and I look forward to a long and productive life of painting that is open to the potential in subconscious and conscious sources of inspiration.

CONCLUSION

Over the past two years, I have greatly heightened my visual awareness, and I have been tapping into the vast potential of an intuitive and subconscious source for image making. I transitioned into a working method that privileges the visual and also provides a space for the viewer's interpretation. My current paintings explore a variety of human themes through natural elements. These works allude to concepts across disciplines including psychology, neuroscience, mythology, and the history of traditional eastern art. It has been a challenging yet fulfilling process to create this series of paintings and to examine my own working methods through the writing of this thesis. I have gained a large amount of personal insight, and I look forward to further artistic growth and exploration after I leave LCAD's MFA program.

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APPENDIX A



Ghost, 50 x 50 inches oil on canvas



Into the Unknown, 50 x 50 inches oil on canvas



Hydra, 16 x 16 inches oil on panel



Left Behind, 4 x 5 feet oil on canvas



Plato Looking at Trees, 18 x 18 inches oil on canvas



Swept Away, 36 x 54 inches oil on canvas



Internment, 18 x 18 inches oil on canvas



Icarus, 36 x 48 inches oil on canvas



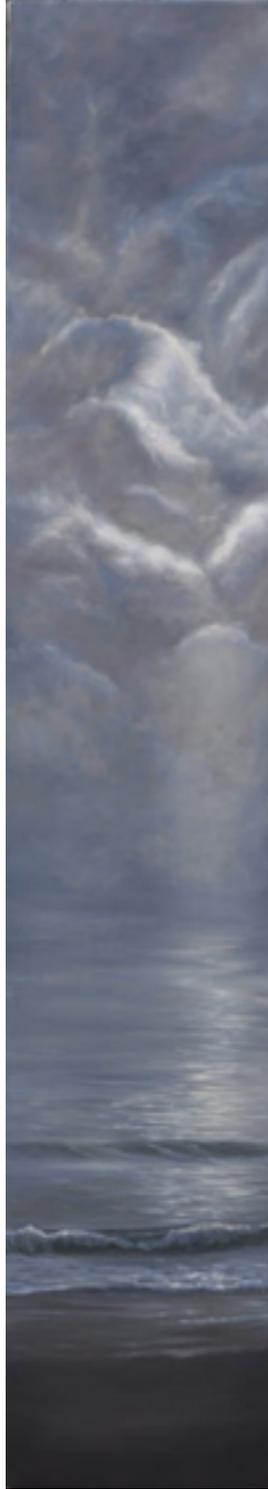
“Lake Anza” 11 x 60 inches oil on canvas



Treble Clef, 12 x 44 inches oil on canvas



Calligraphy, 50 x 50 inches oil on canvas



Three States of Matter, 11 x 60 inches oil on canvas



Red Tide, 14 x 65 inches oil on canvas



Transition, 12 x 55 inches, Oil on Canvas 2012



Nexus, 12 x 55 inches oil on canvas



Rhizome, 12 x 55 inches, Oil on Canvas



Pea Soup, 12 x 36 inches, Oil on Canvas,
Fall 2012

ARTIST'S NOTE

View my recent work online:

<http://www.robinextrum.com/>